

RAS-AL-KHAIMAH

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Occasionally we would hear the shrill voice of the *Muezzin* as he chanted from the mosque tower, and those who were caught napping in the streets or desert would fall on their knees straight away and prostrate themselves to the ground. The Arab method of prayer is both complicated and physically uncomfortable. The incantation is said standing, but after each prayer the worshipper, always facing the east, will fall on his knees, touching the ground several times with his forehead. The guards in the Fort had the habit of performing their religious rites and exercises in front of my office door and, as I did not like to disturb them at such times, the practice proved a trifle inconvenient. 782

At seven-thirty Bird drove Allison and myself to the sheikh's palace, which was a rather unimposing residence about a quarter of a mile away. The real palace, or fort, from which the royal flag fluttered from a ruined tower, was only a few yards away, but it was seldom used as a residence. Originally built by the Portuguese when they invaded the Persian Gulf in the seventeenth century, it had been renovated and partially rebuilt in desert style by successive sheikhs, but the present ruler believed in retrenchment rather than expenditure. He had no intention of spending his money on the upkeep of so pretentious a relic, which was imposing in a ruinous way from the outside, but within shabby and dilapidated in the extreme. In cool weather he would sit with his entourage on a bench outside the great gateway, but the interior was used only by his sons as a kind of gigantic playroom, or by some of his retinue for indulging in shady deals or illegal hashish smoking. 622

The main residence, to which we were now driving, was a two-storeyed house with a fretted balcony, Moorish windows and a heavily studded door of plain tulip wood. A high mud wall rose up to the windows on one side, and behind this lay the harem. We were met on the steps by the sheikh, Sultan bin Saqr, his three sons, and about a dozen bearded gentlemen with gilded swords and rifles. They formed the sheikh's retinue, and were secretaries, ministers, advisers of some sort and, generally speaking, 'hangers-on', it being a custom of that country for members of the court to attach themselves to the ruler and live at his expense. The cost of maintaining such an entourage and household was about a thousand rupees a day, I was informed; that is, in English money at the present rate of exchange, about £25. Needless to say, the greater part of this sum was derived from taxes and rents. [342]

Sultan bin Saqr wore a perfumed robe of embroidered linen. 622
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622 with a triple aggal of gold thread above his flowered silk head-dress,
 291 or kufeyh. His sandals were likewise embroidered with gold thread, and he wore his ceremonial gold sword and curved *hangar*. His three sons, aged six, ten and twelve, were similarly dressed, whilst the nobles, although garbed more simply, managed to create an air of affluence. One marked difference was that the sheikh's beard was luxuriously oiled, combed and scented, whereas the beards of his courtiers were ragged, unkempt and rather dirty.

622 Closely guarded by a ruffianly gang of armed thugs, the sheikh,
 342 after embracing us, took us into the inner courtyard. This was a plain, unfurnished room with a floor of black and white marble squares, where the sheikh, his sons, and the Khan Bahadur, an old friend of ours, whose name was Abdur bin Razzak, removed their sandals prior to entering the throne room. As Europeans entering an Arab house do not remove their shoes, it being considered beneath their dignity to do so (although in reality the practice has a religious basis and would, therefore, have no meaning for an infidel), we followed the royal party after divesting ourselves of our hats. These, together with our torches, we were advised by Abdur bin Razzak to keep in our possession, otherwise they might be difficult to recover afterwards!

[353] The throne room was a long, bare apartment with undecorated, distempered walls broken only by a frieze of the inevitable Moorish pattern. The floor was covered with exquisite Persian rugs, and at the end of the room were half a dozen chairs of Victorian Gothic design covered with purple cushions. It takes a long time to sit
 516 down in an Arab house. It is customary for the host to make the pretence of motioning the guest to a chair; the guest is expected to refuse the invitation and, in turn, to motion the host to his own chair. When there are several guests, this absurd ritual of gesticulation can continue for several minutes. Eventually the sheikh settled himself in the largest chair, or throne, and we arranged ourselves in order of precedence on either side of him. Since Captain
 000 Bird was the only one who spoke Arabic at all fluently, and Abdur bin Razzak the only Arab present who spoke any English, conversation with the sheikh and his sons had to be conducted through these two intermediaries. I have often suspected later that the eldest son, Abdul, had quite a useful command of English, but he never showed the slightest sign of understanding a word that we said. When I got to know him better, however, and found out

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what a cunning little monkey he was, I was more circumspect in the remarks I let drop to my friends in the sheikh's presence. 000

During a formal visit of this kind the conversation inevitably begins with remarks about the weather, the state of one's health and other commonplaces, and by degrees veers to more practical subjects until, eventually, the subject one really wishes to discuss is delicately touched upon. Certain matters, such as references to women and religion, should never be mentioned, unless one is really exceptionally intimate with one's host. Unsuspecting visitors to Arabia frequently cause offence in this manner. It is also considered bad manners to ask too many questions, even on matters in which one may naturally be very interested, such as Arab customs and tradition. 576

Experience is the only guide in such things, and one learns in time the correct way of phrasing a sentence to which the required answer will be courteously given, without being too gauche or direct. I am afraid that Allison and I broke the rules rather badly on this occasion, for we rained innumerable questions upon the sheikh through our able interpreter, Abdur bin Razzak. Yet I often wondered afterwards whether this very able diplomat did not discreetly change the questions into honeyed words of flattery, for the sheikh seemed as pleased with our catechism as we were with his replies! Among the subjects discussed were locusts, Persian rugs, wheat supplies, the price of goods from India, the numbers of aircraft we were expecting that week and in the future, and the prospects of the date crop. 000

Throughout this conversational session (a customary preamble to a meal), we were aware of being closely scrutinized by the other guests, who, together with the ruffianly guards, stood impatiently in the courtyard awaiting the signal to go in to dinner. We were presently joined by a young Arab of dark, almost negroid complexion and features, with an elaborate scarlet turban, which reminded us of the robber king's head-dress in *Chu Chin Chow*. After making a low obeisance to the sheikh, he permitted himself to be kissed on both cheeks before retiring to a chair. This young man, I was afterwards told, was the heir to the Kalba sheikhdom, but, being under age, the affairs of his land were managed by the Regent, a relative of the sheikh's. 622 [291]

A story of typical Arab intrigue surrounded this young prince. His father, the sheikh of Kalba, had been murdered by a rival sheikh who had his eye on the fertile valleys and date plantations of

CHAPTER IV

WE were awakened shortly after dawn by the roaring of the surf 000 and, after a wash down with ice-cold well water in the courtyard, I strolled through the village to get a glimpse of the mountains. Pink in the first flush of morning light, Jebel Kawa, the highest peak in the range, rose in fluted folds from a turquoise sea. A brisk westerly wind blew across the desert, and the palm fronds nodded violently, like feathers in the bonnets of agitated old ladies. Streaks of butterfly blue glinted between the leaves—the bright underwings of the jays. Behind the low plaster wall of a merchant's summer house the plum trees were sprouting into baby green, and tortoise-shell butterflies hovered lazily in the increasing radiance of sunlight.

On my return to the Khan Sahib's house I found Sparkes smoking a cigarette in the courtyard. Ali had sent a car with a towrope and had brought him back at midnight, but the ropes had broken several times and we were abed before he reached the village. Sparkes showed me a grey lizard he had brought back, a fine specimen measuring four feet from nose to tail, which he gave to one of the servants to cook for their dinner. Breakfast was a simple meal of fruit, coffee and dates rolled in chipatties; being ravenous we did it justice. The Arabs are sparing eaters, and only 261 consume large quantities of food at their ceremonial feasts or when entertaining guests, and we found that when in the desert it was easy to accustom oneself to their habits.

After a pipe and a stroll along the foreshore, we were joined by 291 ● the Khan Sahib, resplendent in a gold-brocaded turban and brown 142 silk *abbas*, and he suggested that we should make a call on Sheikh Sultan bin Salim, ruler of Ras-al-Khaimah. The Khan Sahib, who is a handsome man of sixty-five, six feet tall, broad-shouldered and inclined to stoutness, has the fair skin of the Persian or Bedouin, expressive hands, and the gracious manners of an aristocrat. With his bushy black eyebrows and grey toothbrush moustache, he could easily be mistaken for an Italian nobleman. He belongs to a very ancient Arab family, and his father was British Resident at Sharjah at the beginning of the century.

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Four of the Askhari guards who watch over the Fort at Sharjah.
They are natives of Muscat

following p 60 (c)

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H.H. Sheikh Sultan bin Saqr of Sharjah, with his ten-year-old son, Abdul, and Mr. Jasim, the Residency Agent.

following p 60 (f).

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One of the falcon-hawks kept by the Sheikh of Al 'Ajman and used
for hunting wild bustard

following p 60 (g)

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Hussein, Wazir of Al 'Ajman, with two of the Sheikh's horses and
their grooms

following p. 60 (h)

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chalcedony stone with a faded inscription, and had taken it to the silversmith to have it made into a ring; the purpose of his visit was to collect and pay for it, not always a simple matter in Arabia, where the merchant normally demands twice the legitimate price and expects to be beaten down. 437

Mahmud, who is a Baluchi and lives with his family in the poorer part of the town, took us through the less salubrious quarter. Sharjah has no city wall proper, but its place is taken by a ring of filthy hovels, the palm-thatched barousti huts of the coolies, slaves and servants. The stench from these slums is unbearable in hot weather, for each hut dweller uses his front door as a cesspool and a refuse dump, and the place is infested with flies and insects; native children crawl about in the sand, and mangy pai dogs snarl at one's approach. These miserable hovels afford protection against neither sun nor rain, and it is remarkable that their poverty-stricken inhabitants are not afflicted with disease. The quarter is a disgrace to Sharjah town and, although the Political Officer has remonstrated with the sheikh about it, he refuses to have the place rebuilt. 361 362

It was a pleasant relief to pass into the cool, dim alleys leading to the town; many of them are roofed with palm-thatch and are comparatively clean. The walls are honeycombed with doorways, leading to the houses of the tradesmen and metalsmiths. After a walk of fifteen minutes through the maze of dark, winding streets, during the progress of which we were conscious of hundreds of dark eyes staring curiously at us, we reached the sugar market. This is a large square in the centre of the town; it is roofed-in with huge strips of palm-matting, supported by whitewashed wooden pillars, making it very dim inside. 363 361 443 366

Tethered to the pillars were six camels, snarling and grumbling; occasionally they tried to rise, but their forefeet were tied together and they would hobble for a few yards and quickly fall back on their knees. They had brought bags of sugar from a boat in the harbour, and their owners were arguing over prices with the brokers. The market, which is about six hundred feet square, contains warehouses, brokers' offices and shops on each side. We should have liked to take a photograph of it, but as Sparkes had no time-exposure on his camera he decided not to risk wasting his film.

The colour and variety of dress one sees in a native bazaar is remarkable. The women are the least attractive, their trousers, wraps and veils being of an unrelieved black; it is their menfolk 291 ●

[Sharjah bazaar]

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- 291 who wear the finery. Their *abbas*, or ankle-length gowns, are of silk or linen, sometimes of a coarse, sackcloth material, but they are dyed in a variety of colours, from red and brown to purple, and those of the merchants are hemmed and embroidered with gold and silver thread. The head-dress is often of brightly-coloured silk, bound with an *aggal*, and the crescent-shaped sandals are invariably decorated with stencilled dyes or gold thread. The wealthier
- 301 classes are fond of displaying jewellery, and like to wear large pearl or diamond rings on their fingers; some wear ear-rings, giving them a piratical air, whilst others wear or carry amber necklaces, which they use for meditation and prayer as a Christian will use his rosary.
- 443 The shops in the bazaar are closed from midday to four o'clock,
512 as the Arabs take a siesta after lunch—a custom bequeathed by their Moorish cousins to the Spaniards and observed in Spain to this day. This adjournment is not due to laziness, but is extremely practical, since the hottest time of the day occurs after twelve o'clock. At 4 p.m. the sun loses most of its heat and the streets are pleasantly cool. The shutters are then pulled down from the shop fronts, and the bazaar is thronged with gaily-dressed crowds of shoppers and sightseers.
- 443 The shops are merely open booths, or stalls, exposed to sand
326 and flies, with the living quarters behind. As in China and
467 mediæval Europe, some of the trades, such as those of the tinsmiths, silversmiths and leather merchants, are protected by guilds, and the members confine themselves to special parts of the town or bazaar. Thus in Sharjah there is a Street of Silversmiths, where these merchants exercise their craft to the exclusion of all other trades; Dubai similarly has a Street of Goldsmiths. These titles sound as though they had been taken from *Hassan* or the *Arabian Nights* and, indeed, the streets bear some resemblance to an Eastern stage setting.
- 443 The food shops are always interesting. The wares are displayed in little palm-weave panniers, and include cinnamon, nutmegs, ginger and spices, huge lumps of unrefined rock salt, dried peas and beans, attar flour, ghee butter, pea-nuts, curry powder, chicory and rice. Under the shop front hang rows of locally-grown tobacco leaves, strips of henna, and various kinds of salted, odorous dried fish. A variety of smells, pungent and aromatic, comes from these booths in the hot weather and can be detected from quite a distance.
- The most colourful shops are those of the drapers, where the

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perfume and tobacco. He then took us by the hand and led us through the courtyard into the guest chamber. A terrace of black marble steps led up to it, through a little brass-studded door, which he unlocked. The chamber was a typical Arab interior. Shiraz and Turkish rugs covered the stone floor, and the furniture consisted of a Moorish-type table, inlaid with mother-o'-pearl, a cane settee, and a few plush-seated chairs. The walls, however, were not plain as were those of Sheikh Sultan's palace; leather saddles of sheepskin, decorated with red wool fringes, hung from iron hooks; there were numerous photographs of the sheikh and his relatives, as well as a small armoury. This included an old flintlock gun, a German Mauser pistol (presented to the sheikh by King Ibn Saud, from whom he bought his horses), a .22 Martini rifle, and a long hiltless battle sword in a black leather scabbard, richly decorated with bands of damascened gold. 000
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Raschid showed us his armoury with great pride, and explained in detail the history of each exhibit. He then took the battle sword from the wall; it was at least five feet in length and, as he withdrew the blade from the scabbard, he gave it a quick twist with his wrist. The blade shimmered and sang like a tuning fork. I tried to do the same but the sword was exceedingly heavy to handle and I failed to get any 'tune' out of it. Raschid told us that the sword was forged for his ancestors at Damascus four hundred years ago, and was a sword of honour. It had been used in battle, as a two-handed weapon, and was reputed to have slain a hundred men.

The sheikh's little son, Abdul bin Hamid, wore a curved Muscat dagger of great beauty, the scabbard and hilt being of chased gold. We sat on cushions on the floor, and were joined by the sheikh's elder son, aged eleven, and a four years' old girl, a black-eyed little mite with pigtails, who was evidently a great favourite of the sheikh's. She wore a little tunic of silk taffeta, richly embroidered short silk trousers and sandals of gazelle skin; her bare ankles were covered with silver rings. She looked thoroughly spoiled, and had the manner of an autocrat, screaming shrilly at her brother whenever he dared to touch her rag doll. 291●

Hussein, the wazir, entered the chamber with a secretary and some other relatives of the sheikh, including an elderly uncle from Baraimi, and after we had exchanged greetings and washed our hands in the silver bowl, slaves were summoned to bring in the dinner. It was rather early for a meal, and we had not long since 264

264 had lunch, but it was not possible to decline the dishes placed before us. In the centre of the dining-mat was a huge bowl of rice and steamed sheep, very fat and oily; chipatties, truffles, curry, sheep's liver, and pastry puff balls filled with honey. The sheikh presented me with a large piece of fat with his own hands, and I felt sick before it had entered my mouth.

272 After the meal we again washed our hands and sat drinking out of little brass cups of bitter coffee. Cigarettes were produced

576 and all smoked except the uncle from Baraimi. The conversation, as is customary during social calls, began with polite enquiries after one's health. Raschid then recounted some of his experiences in the hunting field, and sent his son to bring a pile of fine gazelle skins, trophies of the chase; one of especial beauty and fine marking he presented to me, together with a pair of horns. The wazir,

533 Hussein, looked as though he were tired of the conversation, and produced a blackwood reed from the folds of his *abbas* and began to play a wistful little tune. Abdul bin Hamid sang in a high-pitched voice and we sat back on our cushions and listened. The tune was monotonous and without melody, but it had a weirdly fascinating rhythm.

622 The sheikh, whose tales of the hunt were thus rudely interrupted, grew restless; he belched aggressively and pulled at his beard. At length, losing all patience, he rose abruptly and signalled us to follow him through the courtyard. Hussein went on playing his melancholy tune, so we wandered through the fort with Raschid and his daughter. Scores of ragged children came into the courtyard to stare at us; they were nothing to do with the sheikh, unless they were children of his servants, and he took no notice of them. With his twinkling blue eyes, humorous mouth and hawk-like nose, he might have been an Eastern king, benevolent and wise, surrounded by his subjects. He had perfect teeth, stained at the edges by tobacco, and on his finely-shaped hand wore a large cornelian stone, engraved with an account of his descent. The Arabs do not as a rule have a crest or heraldic design, although some of the sheikhs display a badge, usually in the form of a crescent or sometimes a bird or lion which is engraved on seals and the backs of chairs.

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291 Raschid on this occasion wore a very barbaric-looking turban of white and purple Kashmir wool and looked more like a pirate than ever. When we had seen over the fort, many of the rooms of which were completely bare, he conducted us to the stables

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Hussein, Wazir to the Sheikh of Al 'Ajman, wearing the gold State dagger in his girdle

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following p 140 (a).

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Hamid bin Rahman, a guide employed by the Sheikh of Al 'Ajman,
who helped me to reach the 'Lost City'

following p. 140 (8)

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609 which buzzed around us. These *Badu*, whose ages ranged from
 [51] twenty to eighty years of age, were all bearded and very dirty;
 although they were the notables of the camp, their clothing was
 ragged and scanty, and my preconceptions of the romantic nomad's
 life they led quickly vanished. They were, if the truth be told,
 mere gipsies of the desert, as wild and treacherous as the nomad
 can be.

• [29] Sheikh Hadi, who had left us to be stared at by these strange
 622 creatures, who plucked at their beards and whispered to one
 609 another (Tandy's bare legs were a subject of much scandalized
 comment), presently reappeared with his father. Sheikh Moham-
 med bin Ali, ruler of all the Beni Quitab tribes of Oman, was a
 magnificent figure, in spite of his eighty years. Over six feet
 tall, thin and sinewy, he had a flowing white beard and a pair of
 the keenest eyes I have ever seen. His face, dominated by a sharp,
 hawk-like nose, was the colour of old parchment and revealed great
 character and power. All stood up as he entered the tent, stooping
 low at the entrance, and there was a long silence as we were in-
 troduced by Sheikh Hamid.

When the Sheikh Mohammed had taken his place in the circle
 we returned to our squatting position, while Tandy alone conversed
 with the sheikh about the weather, the state of the crops and the
 health of the camels. The rest of us did not speak, eyeing the
 gnarled face of Mohammed, with its great, hooked nose and deep-
 set eyes, with something approaching awe. Then something which
 Tandy said made the old man laugh and the spell was broken.
 Cigarettes were produced and a babel of conversation broke loose.
 Tandy got down to business and discussed local politics, the irriga-
 tion project at Djaidh, and finally, realizing that the old man was
 in a good humour, asked him if he would provide guides for the
 Anti-Locust Commission, which wanted to enter the mountain
 pass beyond Jebel Faiyah.

'Praise Allah, but they are spies, these Indians!' the sheikh
 laughed. 'They want to map out my land and then build huts
 on it, like they did at Sharjah. Next, your Government will
 want to flatten the ground to make a nest for the great sky-birds,
ti-ara (aeroplanes). Truly, the ways of Allah are mysterious and
 wonderful, but the ways of the foreigner are cunning.' The
 others considered this speech a huge joke, and laughed and
 applauded. Then Tandy, who is no mean diplomat, suggested
 that the Beni Quitab were afraid that the Anti-Locust party, by

THE RUB-AL-KHALI

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Seated around our camp fire that night, Hamid burst into a long and rather plaintive song about our journey, of which I give a literal translation: 533
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'Weary the traveller who leaves his home,
Saddened by comforts he has left behind;
Only the fool will brave the burning sun,
Searching for ghostly cities of the mind.

'Allah protect us from the djinns and fiends,
Spirits of evil who infest the dunes;
Let us return with haste to those we love,
And woo them with brave tales and manly tunes.'

We laughed loudly at this nostalgic chant, and the singer, cyeing us balefully for a moment, got up and retired to his tent. We had changed into Arab dress,* which is more comfortable in the desert than shorts and bush shirts, and there was little to distinguish either Schultz or myself from our companions. The scorching sun had burnt our faces a deep copper-brown, with white circles around our eyes, where they had been protected by sun-glasses. While Suliman prepared the evening meal, and Khofan bin Salim recited a long narrative poem which he had heard in Muscat—an Homeric tale of wifely infidelity—I read a chapter of the Koran.

Khofan was babbling on:

'Salaman heard—the Sea of his Soul was moved,
And bubbled up with jewels, and he said:
Oh Shah, I am the slave of Thy Desire,
Dust of the Throne ascending Foot am I'

*The Arab cloak, or outer garment, is known as an *abba*, and is usually of coarse linen, white, black or brown, sometimes edged with gold braid. The head-dress is composed of a square of fine muslin or Kashmir wool, and is worn under the black-braided *aggal*. In the Trucial Oman Coast this head-dress is known as a *ghutra*, but in the Nejd and other parts of Arabia it is also called a *kufeyk*. It is worn by folding the *ghutra* into a triangle, the base of which is placed across the forehead, the cloth being kept in place by the *aggal*. The ends of the *ghutra* offer protection against insects, dust and the rays of the sun, and during a sand-storm are sometimes drawn across the mouth to form a veil. 291

2: Codrai G-3 (1942-1950) 1950 MK1 Oman

Trucial Oman MK4

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*Soldier, guide and statesman — but above all
a connoisseur of the art of coffee-making. Good
manners require that a guest sip down three
cups of the bitter, black brew.*

P. 189 (C)

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On the coast any unveiled woman is usually either a Negress or a Baluchi. Even this little girl (fascinated by an aeroplane) would probably be veiled if an Arab. The locket around her neck contains scraps from the Koran to protect her from evil spirits.



An ancient sail-maker plies his still more ancient craft according to an unchanged design. The probabilities are that some deep-sea dhow will rely on this sail to carry its cargo of dates to Southern Arabia, East Africa or the west coast of India.



P.192 (C)

Category 294-433

MK4 Trucial Oman

Card 005

